

“Now and Always”

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Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Author Lloyd C. Douglas tells this story from his college years, when he lived in a boarding house. An elderly retired music teacher lived on the first floor, where he was bound to a wheelchair. Every morning, Douglas would stick his head in the door of the teacher’s apartment and ask the same question, “Well, what’s the good news?”

The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of the wheelchair and say, “That’s middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat. The piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, *that is middle C.*” [1]

Maybe that’s why you’re here today. In some manner of speaking, maybe you’re here in worship today, gathered with the church, simply to hear something steady, something unchanging, something that is the same today as it was yesterday, as it will be tomorrow and next week, and, who knows? For a thousand years?

Maybe you didn’t consciously tell yourself that this morning. When you woke up, got dressed, scraped the ice off the car, got yourself here... Perhaps the obvious lure to this time and place was not some inner spiritual urge to cope with an out-of-tune life or an out-of-tune world. But here we are, and here we sang in our first hymn, “Come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace.” But perhaps the question lingers or even festers: “Is there really something constant to which I can be tuned?”

A pastor received a long letter from a man struggling with his faith. A husband and a father of two small children, she shares that this man’s sense of responsibility was what was keeping his wilder impulses in check. “If he were not expected at home to help bathe the kids and put them to bed,” she writes, “he would be gone—off to search the world for food for his starving heart.” As it was, though, he was struggling to keep it together—to find and keep his faith, be a good dad, a good husband, to do the right thing at home and at work.

In his letter, he wrote about his frustration with Christianity—and not just his disappointment with the Church, but also his inherent distrust of the gospel. “How do I know that if I invest the effort and risk whatever shred of dignity I have left it will work for me? If I witness and evangelize, if I quit drinking and throwing money away; if I pray every night, read the Bible daily, take my family to church every Sunday, if I speak out at work against racism, sexism, exploitation of any kind, will I be a man transformed or just a man unemployed, known only for his foolish hypocrisy?” [2]

We ask it a hundred different ways, but it’s the same question. *God, is there truth and is it steady and can I trust it to be the same yesterday, today, tomorrow?* It’s an old, old question. And often the stability we build for ourselves—family, home, work, meaning... our own human-made stability—we hope mirrors a larger and more wonderful Truth Now and Forever. But we are prone to wander, prone to create instability for ourselves, prone to question the Source of it all.

We find the people of Israel doing much the same in today’s reading. Remember, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people dispersed—many of them now lived in Babylon in exile. And they’d been there a while. 20 years, 40 years, 60 years, 70 years... long enough for a whole generation to come and go—long enough, certainly, for folks to lose faith, to wonder, “Did this God who was supposed to be so great and wonderful ever really existed to begin with? And if so, why were our homes destroyed? Why were we brought to exile in this strange land? How long must we be removed from our people and our home?”

Somewhere along the way, at some point during those 70 long years, someone must have said, must have felt, “Well maybe God is not the God I thought I knew.” And then, “So maybe I’m not who I thought I was. Maybe nothing’s what I thought it was.”

A roommate of mine in college was a music education major, and every day one of his professors started class *the exact same way*. “Sing middle C.” Coming into the room, that’s what each student had to do. No tuning fork, no pitch pipe—just memory and, if not perfect pitch, hopefully relative pitch. That was your ticket into class: standing there in the doorway trying to produce a perfect middle C.

That’s what the people of Israel were trying to do in captivity in Babylon—without their homeland, without their Temple: *Sing middle C*. Sing of God’s faithfulness when you have no evidence for it. Sing of God’s presence when you doubt God is anywhere to be found. Sing of God’s love while you wonder how a loving God could let something like this happen.

To these questions to prophet Isaiah unleashes some of the most loving, comforting words in Scripture.

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,*

and the flame shall not consume you...

And Isaiah shares God's promise:

Because you are precious in my sight,

and honored,

and I love you...

Do not fear,

for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you;

God's promise is a promise to return Israel to its homeland, to gather the people from all over the earth and to restore them.

Isaiah sings middle C for the people, and the tone is pure and true. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, and always, do not fear, God is with you, you are precious in God's sight, and God will provide for you. The thing about exile, though, is that it makes it hard to hear notes that are pure and true. The doubts and fears that swirl through our experiences of exile tend to throw us off pitch.

During the contentious political battles this past fall, in the New York Times, columnist David Brooks critiqued our politicians arguing that both political parties have been *inebriated by the same fantasy: that the other party will not exist*. Brooks claims that every single political speech during the election was based on this fantasy—that there wasn't one speech that grappled with the fact that this new wave of politicians would have to pass laws in the context of our highly polarized and even divided nation. [3]

We live in exile from each other—ideologically and politically, we live in self-imposed and other-imposed exile. The election is over, but now we're talking fiscal cliff and guns and Afghanistan and Syria. Both sides and then some—we're all out of tune with each other, all struggling to find middle C—a truth that we can count on yesterday, today, tomorrow.

Exile—that experience of finding ourselves forcibly separated from life as we knew it—exile is an experience we've all come to know. A college student that I knew in Texas was leaving the church. "It's not you, it's me," he said, and I had a flashback to several high school break-ups. "It's not you, it's me. I just can't believe it anymore. I mean, if God cares about us and everything, why is there so much evil and so much suffering in the world?" That is an experience of exile—an experience of the question and doubt being so powerful that it moves us from our center, away from home.

Exile—that experience of finding ourselves forcibly separated from life as we knew it. The marriage falters and crumbles, and we find ourselves in exile from love as we thought it would be. The company downsizes and you wake up one morning feeling like you're living in exile—exile from work, from purpose, from meaning. The neighborhood changes, the friendship deteriorates, the diagnosis comes... and whatever we thought life was or was becoming *takes a wrong turn* and we come to know the experience of exile.

To God's people living in exile, what can God do other than say to them, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. Now and always you are precious in

my sight, and honored, and I love you.” Maybe that really is why you’re here today. Simply to hear something steady, something unchanging, something that’s true yesterday, today, tomorrow, for the next thousand years...

Let it be those words and let it be the Spirit who allows you to hear them now:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name,
you are mine.
Now and always you are precious in my sight,
and honored,
and I love you.”

1. Max Lucado, *GRACE for the Moment, Volume II*, 114
2. From Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon “No Rewards” in *Bread of Angels*
3. David Brooks’ piece, “Ryan’s Biggest Mistake” appeared as a *New York Times* op-ed on August 23, 2012. I’m grateful to Derek Starr Redwine, though, for sharing it in his sermon, “Too Much Talking!” preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Akron OH.